

Throughout her work, Lorène Bourgeois has been concerned with transition and mediation. Her human figures are often suffused with animality (they have thick limbs, curious and uncompromising faces, a desire to act out ancient instincts) and her animal figures often have human propensities (they have thoughtful faces, a proud and sometimes haughty air, and they are not above posing). Likewise, her sleeping and her swimming figures are locked in that mysterious transience between death and life, between thought and action, between movement and stasis. Even the way these works are created speaks of transformation. The image is created through the manipulation of ink on a metal plate and then transferred by an etching press onto a sheet of paper. A trace of colour is left on the press and then the next colour section of the image is applied. "While the plate itself is never altered," says Bourgeois in a note to this show, "it is a surface used to generate an extended sequence of images. A single two-foot plate therefore becomes a module that engenders an entire large-scale work."

In her most recent show, "Les Géants: Large-Scale Monotypes," these transformative concerns are given new vitality, new permutations. Bourgeois has taken images from a variety of sources, including archival photographs and medieval sculptures, and fashioned them into theatrically staged, ominous tableaux. Hands (of the artist, of some god, of the viewer?) are simultaneously simple human appendages and a sign of some greater, almost religious force. These are hands that work and that also present the contours of the spirit. These are hands that know they are no different than the appendages of animals and no different than the hand of God. In other works, sleepers calmly dream. Of death and the future? Of their beastly qualities? Sometimes one person asleep alone; sometimes two; in one bed, five men quietly, fraternally asleep. Within these sleeping figures is the human spirit suspended, softly floating through the vicissitudes of life. Their faces are enclosed in a rich simplicity, their minds playing with a multitude of transfigurations.



Photo: Peter Leavis

Lorène Bourgeois
La Chute
(1990)
Etching ink
on paper
7-1/2 x 8 ft

In *La Presence*, a large, thick face looks out over the torso and head of a similar figure. There is a calm yet disturbing distance between the two figures – a comment on the distance between the mind and the body. Both figures have presence; each has power over the other. The work attempts to articulate the distance between what we are and what we think we are; between what we are and what we will become; between what we are and what we are not. These figures speak of memories, both physical and spiritual, that delineate the way we see the world – memories that can never be rationally dissected yet that nevertheless determine the physical world's influence on our lives.

La Chute, with its falling figure and its ethereal hands both pushing and pulling, intimates the infinitely complex relation between heaven and earth, between existence and release, between fate and absence. The rigid figure falls through itself into space, into another form of being. What is the distinction between head and hand: where does one thing leave off and the other begin? Are

physicality and thought merely the same thing, despite our relentless desire to separate them? Is movement a form of stillness, and stillness a form of movement? *La Chute* asks these and many similar questions.

In *Le Passeur*, eight inquisitive, respectful heads face a huge, open hand that seems to represent fear, compassion, power and knowledge. The relationship between head and hand, thought and deed, idea and action are presented dispassionately to the viewer's gaze. In much other contemporary artmaking, there is a well-informed and specific intellect at work. If you are able to figure out the artist's game, you are able to figure out the art. In paintings such as *Le Passeur*, Bourgeois presents no desire to hold the key to some cerebral puzzle. There are ominous threads here, but no facile attempt at closure. The viewer leaves the piece still suspended in thought, still insulated by those essential human strengths – imagination and illusion.

Peter O'Brien